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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY CALLS FOR "DIALOGUE" REACTION TO POPE'S COMMENTS

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Summary

1.(U) In reaction to the controversy surrounding Pope Benedict's comments on Mohammed, the Austrian Muslim Community (IGGIO) has issued appeals for an interreligious dialogue. Together with the Austrian Catholic Church, IGGIO initiated a "day of dialogue" on September 22, with public discussions on relations between Christians and Muslims. End Summary.

Reaction to Pope's Comments

2.(U) The Austrian Muslim community (IGGIO) reacted with appeals for moderation in the controversy surrounding Pope Benedict's use of a quote characterizing Mohammed as having introduced "only bad and inhumane elements" to the world. In a September 18 interview, IGGIO President Anas Schakfeh expressed hope that there would be "enough smart people on both sides to overcome this incident." Schakfeh called for a calm dialogue between Christians and Muslims to address "common problems". IGGIO integration spokesman Omar Al-Rawi stressed that, in contrast to the Danish cartoon controversy, the management of the crisis had been better because the Vatican had reacted quickly to clarify the matter.

Day of Dialogue

3.(U) On September 22, the IGGIO, in cooperation with the Austrian Catholic Church, arranged a "day of dialogue" at a square in downtown Vienna. Schakfeh had initiated this action to counter the "day of wrath" that Islamist leaders had proclaimed for September 12. Schakfeh, Vienna auxiliary bishop Helmut Kraetzl and other Islamic and Catholic figures publicly stressed the need for togetherness. Schakfeh noted the importance of "good neighborly relations" despite the differences between the religions. "We live in a pluralist society which has a place for us all," he underscored. Islam would never justify violence in order to enforce religious convictions, he asserted.

Austrian Muslim Community

4.(SBU) There are some 400,000 Muslims in Austria, one third of whom live in Vienna. With Muslims at 4.2 percent of the population, Austria has, after France, the EU's second largest percentage of Muslims. Islam is one of 13 legally recognized religions in Austria. It received this status in 1912. This entails certain privileges, including the authority to participate in the mandatory church contributions program, to provide religious instruction in public schools, to bring religious workers into the country, and to engage in a number of public or quasi-public activities. The Islamic Community (IGGIO) is the official organization representing Muslims in Austria.

